



# Efforts to Address Bullying in U.S. Schools

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## ABSTRACT

Bullying among children and youth has received considerable recent attention by educators, policy makers, health and mental health professionals, the media, and the general public. Recent legislation pertaining to bullying is reviewed, and current school-based bullying prevention and intervention strategies are described and critiqued. A number of common misdirections in efforts to address bullying are presented. Research to date suggests that comprehensive bullying prevention efforts, which involve the entire school community, hold the most promise for changing the norms for behavior and ultimately the prevalence of bullying in schools.

Although bullying among children and youth is hardly a new phenomenon, it has received increased attention in recent years by educators, policy makers, health and mental health professionals, the media, and the general public. The recent legislation pertaining to bullying is likely attributable to both a stronger research base regarding bullying (e.g., its prevalence and effects) and highly publicized reports from the media and the U.S. Secret Service (Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2002) suggesting that many perpetrators of school shootings had felt persecuted, bullied, or threatened by their peers.

## THE NATURE AND PREVALENCE OF BULLYING AMONG SCHOOL CHILDREN

There is general agreement among researchers in defining bullying as aggressive behavior that (a) is intended to cause harm, (b) exists in a relationship in which there is an imbalance of power, and (c) occurs repeatedly, over time. The most common forms of bullying include the use of words (taunting, teasing) (Olweus, 1993; Melton et al., 1998; Unnever, 2001), but bullying also includes physical actions (e.g., hitting, kicking, shoving, or other forms of violence), and more subtle behaviors, such as social exclusion or the manipulation of friendships (Olweus, 1993).

Recent research indicates that bullying is a fairly common experience among American school children. In a nationally representative sample of 15,600 students in grades six through 10, Nansel et al. (2001) found that 17% of the youth reported hav-

ing been bullied "sometimes" or more frequently during the school term, and 19% reported bullying others "sometimes" or more often. Six percent of the students reported both bullying and having been bullied by peers with some regularity. Similar rates of bullying were found by Melton et al. (1998) in their study of 6,500 students in grades four through six in rural South Carolina. In this sample, 23% of students reported having been bullied "several times" or more often in the preceding three months, and nine percent reported being the victim of frequent bullying (once per week or more often). One student in five reported bullying others "several times" or more over a three month period.

*Effects of bullying.* Not only have recent studies documented that bullying is prevalent among children and youth, but research findings also have revealed that bullying may seriously affect the academic work, the psychosocial functioning, and the physical health of children who are targeted by their peers. Children who are bullied by their peers are more likely than non-bullied children to report wanting to avoid attending school and have been found to have higher rates of school absenteeism. Bully victimization also has been found to be linked to lower self-esteem, higher rates of depression, loneliness (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996; Nansel et al., 2001), and anxiety (Craig, 1998; Hodges & Perry, 1996; Olweus, 1978; Rigby & Slee, 1993). Adolescents who have been bullied have reported that the victimization caused significant problems for them, including feelings of isolation, hopelessness, and a loss of

friendships (Hazler, Hoover, & Oliver, 1992). Research examining the health effects of bullying reveals that victims report poorer general health (Rigby, 1996), experience more migraine headaches, and report more suicidal ideation (Rigby & Slee, 1999) than their non-bullied peers. Clearly, the educational, emotional, and physical costs of bullying on victims can be great.

Not only may bullying significantly affect children who are direct victims, but bullying that is persistent and pervasive may seriously erode the entire climate of a school if unchecked (Espelage, Bosworth, & Simon, 2000; Hoover & Hazler, 1991). Bystanders to bullying may feel distress in witnessing the torment of peers and may exhibit anxiety at the prospect of being a future target for bullies. Moreover, if adults or students do not intervene to address bullying, students who are bystanders may perceive that adults either are unconcerned about the behaviors or are powerless to change students' behaviors.

Research focused on children who bully also raises significant concerns. Researchers have observed that children and youth who bully are more likely than their peers to be engaged in other antisocial behaviors such as theft, vandalism (Olweus, 1993), alcohol consumption (Nansel et al., 2001), truancy, fighting (Nansel, Overpeck, Haynie, Ruan, & Scheidt, 2003; Olweus, 1993) and drop-out from school (Byrne,

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1994). Children who bully their peers are more likely to have carried weapons (Nansel et al., 2003) and report high-risk gun ownership (Cunningham, Henggeler, Limber, Melton & Nation, 2000). In a study of fifth, sixth, and seventh grade students in the rural south, Cunningham et al. (2000) found that high-risk gun owners (those who owned guns to gain respect or frighten others) reported higher rates of bullying than did low-risk gun owners (those who owned guns to feel safe or to use for hunting or target-shooting) or those who did not own guns. Finally, at least one study suggests that boys who take part in frequent bullying are at increased risk for engaging criminal behavior as adults. In a longitudinal study of boys in Norway, Olweus (1993) found that individuals who were identified as bullies in middle school were four times as likely as their peers to have three or more criminal convictions by the age of 24.

Research suggests that there is particular reason to be concerned about children who both bully and also are bullied (referred to as bully-victims, aggressive victims, or provocative victims) (Anderson et al., 2001; Kumpulainen & Räsänen, 2000; Limber, 2002; Nansel et al., 2001; Pellegrini, 1998). These children appear more vulnerable to negative outcomes than either passive victims of bullying or children who bully (Pellegrini, 1998). They tend to display the socio-emotional problems of victimized children as well as the behavior problems of bullies (Nansel et al., 2001).

*Risk factors for bullying peers.* A substantial body of research supports the conclusion that antisocial behavior among children results from an interaction between the individual and his or her social ecology—the family, peer group, school, and community (Olweus, Limber, & Mihalic, 1999). Similarly, research focused specifically on bullying indicates that there are individual, familial, peer, school, and community factors that place a youth at risk for bullying his or her peers. Individual risk factors for bullying include an impulsive, dominant personality and lack of empathy, positive attitudes toward violence, and

physical strength (for boys) (Olweus, 1993). Familial predictors of bullying include a lack of positive adult role models (Espelage et al., 2000), little adult supervision (Espelage et al., 2000; Olweus, 1993), a lack of parental warmth (Olweus, 1993), a lack of clear rules to guide children's behavior (Olweus, 1993), and the use of corporal punishment (Espelage, 2000; Olweus, 1993). Baldy and Farrington (1998) observed that children who were bully/victims were more likely than other peers (including children who were only bullies or only victims) to have authoritarian parents.

Children who bully also are more likely than their non-bullying peers to report being exposed to negative peer influences (Espelage, 2000; Olweus, 1993) (e.g., have peers who have damaged or destroyed property, are involved in gang activities, or bully others). Perhaps not surprisingly, risk factors for bullying also exist within the school and surrounding community. School-level risk factors include a lack of adult supervision and indifferent attitudes of students and school staff toward bullying (Olweus, 1993; Olweus, Limber, & Mihalic, 1999). Espelage and colleagues (2000) found that students who expressed concerns about the safety of their neighborhood reported engaging in more bullying behavior.

In light of recent public attention to bullying and research findings that highlight its prevalence, negative effects, and risk factors, many educators, policy makers, and practitioners have focused their attention on development of policies and programs to address bullying among school children. This article will briefly review recent efforts by legislators to stimulate effective responses to bullying and will describe and evaluate several common approaches to bullying prevention and intervention in American schools. Finally, several implications for health educators will be discussed.

### STATUTORY RESPONSES TO BULLYING

In a recent review of legislation in all 50 states, at least 14 states have passed laws that addressed bullying behaviors among school children, and legislative bodies in

several other states have considered such bills (Limber & Small, in press). Several state statutes (e.g., New Hampshire, Vermont, West Virginia) include pointed language about the harms caused by bullying and the need to make bullying prevention a priority. The language in the West Virginia statute is noteworthy:

"The Legislature finds that harassment, intimidation or bullying...is conduct that disrupts both a student's ability to learn and a school's ability to educate its students in a safe, nonthreatening environment" (West Virginia Code Ann., 2001).

Similarly, legislators in New Hampshire state that:

"All pupils have the right to attend public schools that are safe, secure, and peaceful. One of the legislature's highest priorities must be to protect our children from violence by dealing with harassment, including 'bullying' in our public schools" (New Hampshire Review of Statutes Ann., 2000).

Although legislative findings such as these do not carry the weight of law (e.g., they neither prohibit behavior nor proscribe specific action), they nonetheless are important in reflecting current societal concerns and in providing a rationale for a legislature's actions (Limber & Small, in press).

### DEVELOPMENT OF MODEL POLICIES, SAFETY PLANS, AND PROGRAMS TO ADDRESS BULLYING.

Most statutes either require or encourage development of model policies, safety plans, and/or programs that address bullying among school children. For example, Colorado law (Colorado Review of Statutes, 2001) requires that "on and after August 8, 2001, [the conduct and discipline code at each school shall include] a specific policy concerning bullying prevention and education." Each school must submit a yearly written report to his or her local board of education detailing the schools' policy concerning bullying, "including information related to the development and implementation of any bullying prevention programs."

*Requirements to report and track bullying.* Several state laws include provisions that ei-



ther mandate or encourage individuals to report school bullying incidents to authorities (e.g., Connecticut, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Washington, and West Virginia) (Limber & Small, in press). One of the most detailed laws pertaining to bullying prevention and intervention was enacted recently in Connecticut (An Act Concerning Bullying Behavior in Schools and Concerning the Pledge of Allegiance, 2002). This statute requires all local and regional boards of education to develop policies to address bullying, which will: (a) encourage reporting of bullying by students and parents, (b) require all school staff who witness bullying to report it to administrators, (c) require administrators to investigate reports of bullying, (d) "include an intervention strategy for school staff to deal with bullying," (e) include language related to bullying in codes governing student conduct, (f) require that all parents of affected students (bullies and victims) be notified, and (g) require that each school keep a public list of the verified acts of bullying committed.

The state of Georgia has passed the most punitive anti-bullying law. According to Georgia law (Georgia Code Ann., 2001), each local board of education must detail a procedure by which any student in grades six through 12 who has committed an offense of physical bullying for the third time in a school year be assigned to an alternative school. As will be discussed in more detail below, such laws may have negative unintended consequences, such as discouraging students and staff from reporting known or suspected bullying, and isolating children who exhibit antisocial behavior from the positive influences of pro-social peers (Limber, 2002; Limber & Small, in press).

Although laudable in their intent, many statutes provide little guidance for educators seeking to comply with them. For example, many statutes fail to define bullying, leaving it unclear whether their provisions pertain only to physical bullying or to other more subtle forms of bullying as well (e.g., verbal bullying or non-verbal threats, and social exclusion). Those laws that do define bullying frequently are in-

consistent with each other and with commonly-accepted definitions of bullying from the research community (Limber & Small, in press). Moreover, most statutes provide little or no direction as to the types of programs and policies that may be most effective in addressing bullying. Schools currently implement a wide variety of interventions intended to address bullying. Although some are based on programs with proven effectiveness, other strategies and programs lack any research base. Still others are premised on common misperceptions about bullying.

### **WHAT ARE SCHOOLS DOING TO ADDRESS BULLYING?**

Although many schools implemented anti-bullying policies and programs prior to the passage of state mandates, the influence of anti-bullying legislation undoubtedly has spurred many other administrators to take action. Before describing some of the more common approaches to bullying prevention and intervention in public schools, it is important to note several issues that may influence what schools do. First, there is very little information available that documents and evaluates school policies and practices related to bullying. One recent survey from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention School Health Policies and Program Study (Small, Jones, Barrios et al., 2001) found that 63% of all elementary and middle/junior high schools participate in a program to prevent bullying. Most schools surveyed (93.5%) prohibit harassment of students by other students. We do not know with much precision the extent to which all schools are adopting and enforcing bullying strategies. Second, consistent with research findings that bully victimization may be more common among elementary and middle school children than high school students, most school-based efforts (particularly bullying prevention programs) have been targeted at elementary and middle school grades.

Third, staff in many schools may be doing little or nothing to address bullying, or are likely to be ignoring policy development.

For these schools, "business as usual" consists of individual staff members dealing with bullying as they encounter it, but without administrators developing an organized approach to bullying prevention (Limber, in press). A lack of attention to bullying problems may occur for any of several reasons. Some staff members believe that bullying is a rare occurrence in their schools. Others minimize the effects of bullying on children or believe that it is important for children to learn to take care of themselves and cope with bullying on their own (Chase, 2001; Horne & Orpinas, 2003). Still others recognize the problems associated with bullying but are uncertain how to best address them. Efforts to educate school staff about the prevalence of bullying and its effects on children are critical first steps if common misperceptions are to be corrected.

Finally, many school personnel do not address bullying problems explicitly but feel that they do so implicitly through existing violence prevention programs. Unfortunately, as will be described in more detail below, not all violence prevention and intervention strategies are appropriate for cases of bullying. Interventions must take into account that: (a) most cases of bullying do not involve physical violence, (b) bullying exists in a relationship in which there is a power imbalance, and (c) bullying is repeated over time.

*Awareness-raising efforts.* Increasingly, administrators are recognizing that bullying not only exists but that it has harmful effects on victims, bystanders, and the entire school (Limber, 2002). In response, many administrators have sought to raise awareness of staff and students to bullying issues through teacher in-services, student assemblies, and parent meetings. Such efforts represent important initial steps in increasing knowledge and understanding of the problem among staff, students, and parents. These efforts also may be important elements of more comprehensive bullying prevention efforts within a school. However, such activities *cannot* be expected to have significant impact by themselves (Chase, 2001).

*Reporting and tracking.* Many schools

attempt to report and track bullying incidents accurately when they occur. As noted above, several state legislatures encourage or mandate reporting and tracking bullying behaviors but provide little or no guidance in how best to do so. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently has encouraged school injury reporting guidelines that would include bullying information (Barrios, Sleet, & Mercy, 2003; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2001). Currently there is no consistency among schools (even among schools within a single school district) in their reporting procedures. Moreover, there is little agreement about the reporting threshold for bullying, either in terms of frequency or seriousness. For example, some schools might report a bullying incident only if it involves physical violence. Reporting of bullying incidents is an important element of a broader school and community-based prevention and intervention effort. However, reporting alone does little to reduce the frequency and nature of bullying. As Spicer, Young, Sheppard et al. (2003) report, data must be used to make a convincing argument for school policies and practices.

*School exclusion.* In some communities, tracking of bullying incidents may lead to exclusion of a student from public school. "Zero tolerance" or "three strikes" policies for physical bullying are mandated in Georgia and in a number of other local communities. Although the motivation for such policies is understandable, they raise a number of serious concerns (Limber, 2002; Limber, in press). First, they may cast a very large net, as numerous children within any given school bully their peers. Second, they may discourage reporting of suspected bullying by children and adults who are reluctant to see students receive harsh punishment for their behavior (Mulvey & Cauffman, 2001). Finally, they may negatively affect the educational opportunities of students who are suspended, expelled, or sent to alternative settings and seriously limit their exposure to peers who may model more prosocial behavior. In rare cases, public safety may demand that a student be excluded from a public school. However, student exclusion

is not an effective mode of preventing bullying (see also Conolly, Hindman, Jacobs, & Gagnon, 1997).

*Therapeutic treatment for bullies.* Other common bullying interventions include therapeutic treatment for children who bully. Although individual and/or family counseling with children who bully may be an important component of a school's bullying prevention/intervention approach (Oliver, Oaks, & Hoover, 1994; Olweus, 2001), some therapeutic interventions (e.g., anger management classes and self-esteem enhancement sessions) are premised on misconceptions about characteristics and motivations of children who bully, and these are likely to be ineffective. Contrary to the assumptions of many, anger is likely not a primary motivating factor for most children who bully. Similarly, most research indicates that children who bully have average or above average self-esteem. Thus, using anger management and/or self-esteem enhancement training for children who bully may not work to prevent bullying. When such interventions involve group treatment with children who bully, there is particular cause for concern. Even with skilled adult facilitators, students' behavior may, in fact, further deteriorate as group members frequently serve as role models and reinforcers for each others' bullying behavior (Limber, 2002, Limber, in press).

*Mediation and conflict resolution.* Mediation and conflict resolutions techniques are also common strategies used by school personnel to address aggressive behavior among school children (Webster, 1993), but their use to address bullying problems is ill-advised, for several reasons (Cohen, 2002; Limber, 2002, Limber, in press). Although such approaches may be appropriate to resolve *conflicts* between peers of relatively equal power, they are inappropriate when used to try to resolve situations that involve *victimization*, such as bullying. Not only may conflict resolution and mediation strategies send inappropriate messages to victims and bullies (e.g., "We need to work out this conflict between you."), but they also may further victimize a child who has

been bullied (Cohen, 2002; Limber, 2002, Limber, in press) because of the imbalance of power that exists between the two parties.

*Curricular approaches.* In recent years, a number of curricular and psycho-educational approaches to bullying prevention and intervention have been developed (e.g., *Bully Busters* [Newman, Horne, & Bartolomucci, 2000]; *Bully Free Classroom* [Beane, 1999]; *Bullyproof* [Stein & Sjostrom, 1996], *No Putdowns* [Contact Community Services, 1991]; and *Quit It!* [Froschl, Spring, Mullin-Rindler, Stien, & Sjostrom, 1998]). Such curricula share a number of common themes and/or strategies, including: (a) increasing students' and adults' understanding of bullying, (b) exploring the effects of bullying on its victims, (c) teaching strategies for victims to avoid/address bullying, (d) increasing students' understanding of children who bully, (e) increasing motivation for (and skills of) bystanders to intervene in bullying, and (f) building a sense of cohesion among students within a class. Several provide detailed manuals for teachers (e.g., *Bully Busters*, *Bully Free Classroom*). For example, the *Bully Busters* manual provides detailed background information for teachers on such topics as "assisting victims" and "increasing awareness of bullying" and also includes classroom activities on all topics which are designed to engage students in bullying prevention and to strengthen the teacher and student relationship (Newman, Horne, & Bartolomucci, 2000). The *Bully Busters* program also offers two days of staff development training and encourages staff to take part in support team meetings. It represents one of the most comprehensive of the available curricular models.

Research on the effectiveness of curricular approaches to bullying prevention currently is scant, although two recent evaluations of *Bully Busters* produced promising results (Newman & Horne, in press; Howard, Horne, & Jolliff, 2001). In two small-scale studies involving 41 middle school teachers, the program appeared effective in increasing teachers' knowledge of and use of bullying intervention skills, teachers' sense of



self-efficacy in working with students, and reducing the rate of bullying incidents (as measured by teachers' disciplinary referrals) several months after the program had been initiated. Although these findings are promising, additional large-scale studies are needed to test the efficacy of this and other curricular strategies over time.

**Comprehensive approaches.** Several school-wide, comprehensive, bullying prevention programs have been developed, which include curriculum or classroom-level interventions but also include interventions targeted at the broader school environment (e.g., *Bully-Proofing Your Elementary School* [Garrity, Jens, Porter, Sager, & Short-Camilli, 1994], *Bully-Proofing Your Middle School* [Bonds & Stoker, 2000]; *The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program* [Olweus, 1993; Olweus, Limber, & Mihalic, 1999]; *Respect and Protect* [Remboldt & Zimman, 1996]; and *Steps to Respect* [Committee for Children, 2001]). A number of common themes emerge from a review of these comprehensive programs. Although not explicitly stated in all programs, the following themes are at least implicit components of most comprehensive programs: (a) approaches should focus on prevention of bullying *and* intervention in specific bullying incidents; (b) effective bullying prevention requires changing the norms and climate of the school; (c) prevention of bullying requires that the school work together as a community and should include administrators, teachers, non-teaching staff, students, and parents; (d) adults within the school must take the lead in efforts to change the climate and norms of the school with regard to bullying, but students also play important roles as bystanders in this process; (e) bullying prevention requires a long-term commitment of a school community; and (f) although bullying prevention efforts require approaches that are distinct from other violence prevention efforts (e.g., conflict resolution), bullying prevention activities should be coordinated with other prevention and intervention programs within the school.

Among those comprehensive bullying prevention programs that focus on affect-

ing the broader school environment, the best researched is the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program. The Olweus program includes school-wide interventions, interventions within the classroom, and individual interventions with children who bully and who are bullied. Important school-wide interventions include conducting an anonymous survey of students regarding the nature and prevalence of bullying at their school, establishing a team at the school to examine findings from the survey and coordinate bullying prevention efforts with other violence prevention and/or safety-promotion efforts within the school, engaging all staff in training and ongoing education regarding bullying prevention, increasing adult supervision in locations that students indicate are "hot spots" for bullying, establishing and reinforcing school rules against bullying, establishing systems for reporting and tracking bullying incidents, and actively engaging parents in bullying prevention activities (Olweus, Limber, & Mihalic, 1999). Within the classroom, children participate in regular classroom meetings during which they engage in discussion and participate in role-play and other activities related to topics of bullying and peer relations. Finally, school staff intervenes individually with children who bully, children who are victimized by their peers, and the parents of all affected children (Olweus, Limber, & Mihalic, 1999).

The Olweus program, which has been implemented in a number of foreign countries including Canada, Norway, Sweden, Great Britain, and Germany, has been found to result in significant reductions in elementary and middle school students' self-reported bullying, victimization (e.g., Olweus, 1993, 1997a, 1997b; Whitney et al., 1994), and antisocial behavior (Olweus, 1993, 1997a, 1997b). It also has resulted in significant improvements in the perceived climate of school (Olweus, 1993). Although not evaluated extensively in the United States, evaluations of the program in ethnically diverse, non-metropolitan schools in the southeastern United States (Melton et al., 1998) and in urban Philadelphia schools

(Black, 2003), have produced promising results. After one year of implementation, Melton et al. (1998) observed significant reductions in students' self-reports of bullying behavior and significant reductions in self-reported delinquency, vandalism, school misbehavior, and punishment for school-related misbehavior among intervention versus comparison schools. Most recently, Black (2003) observed significant reductions in self-reported bullying and victimization and in adult observation of bullying among those elementary schools in Philadelphia that implemented the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program with fidelity.

To date, the only other comprehensive bullying to be systematically evaluated is *Bully-Proofing Your School* (Garrity, Jens, Porter, Sager, and Short-Camilli, 1994), which is based on principles of the Olweus program and contains many of the same program elements. The program includes three major components: (a) increasing awareness about bullying, (b) teaching protective skills and techniques to help students learn strategies to deal with and resist bullying, and (c) creation of a positive school climate through promotion of a "caring majority" in the school (Epstein, Plog, & Porter, unpublished manuscript). Results of a four-year intervention in a suburban elementary school in Colorado revealed significant decreases in physical, verbal, and exclusionary bullying behavior, as well as increases in students' sense of safety on the playground, in the cafeteria, and going to school (Epstein, Plog, & Porter, unpublished manuscript).

Additional large-scale evaluations of these and other comprehensive bullying prevention programs in a variety of communities within the United States will help to advise educators further about their effectiveness with different age groups and populations. To date, however, comprehensive bullying prevention programs provide the best promise for significantly reducing bullying behaviors among school children. Studies examining the relative effects of curricular versus comprehensive violence prevention programs (as opposed to bullying prevention programs) also

may be instructive. Research suggests that those schools that focused on the broader school environment, as opposed to more narrow curricular strategies, have been more successful in altering students' violent behavior.

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR HEALTH EDUCATORS

The recent national and international attention to bullying presents an important opportunity for health educators within schools and communities to help to implement sound policies and strategies to reduce the prevalence of bullying among children and youth. Specifically, health educators can assist other members of the school staff, parents, and students to recognize the significant negative effects that bullying may have on the well-being of children who are victims of and bystanders to bullying. They also may help to highlight bullying as a potential precursor to other antisocial behaviors among children and youth. Health educators can encourage fellow educators, policy makers, and other health and mental health professionals to avoid common misdirected efforts in bullying prevention and advocate for the implementation and funding of research-based school programs and policies that promote long-term efforts to change the climate of schools and norms for behavior related to bullying. Finally, health educators can play important roles in assisting efforts to develop public information campaigns on bullying prevention. One such effort is the National Bullying Prevention Campaign conducted by the Health Resources and Services Administration, Bureau of Maternal and Child Health, part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The multi-year campaign begins in September, 2003 and will actively engage youth and the community to change the environment in which bullying occurs. Another effort involves Erika Harold, Miss America 2003, whose reign will focus on preventing youth violence and bullying. Health educators can support such programs and help disseminate practical information from research and public education

campaigns to schools, children, parents, and fellow educators.

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